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It's all about Books

Gillian Dooley previews Writers' Week

Launching the Writers' Week program in January, Premier Mike Rann waxed enthusiastic about books. He told of prodigious reading feats among the young participants in his Reading Challenge, and made such large claims for the efficacy of reading books in encouraging the higher virtues, that one couldn't help feeling that his heart was in the right place, despite a certain charming naivety and a slightly worrying tendency to emphasise the quantity of volumes devoured rather than the quality of the reading experience.

Luckily, Writers' Week remains concerned more with quality than quantity. Rick Hosking, chair of the Advisory Committee, is proud of the fact that our festival is still decidedly literary in flavour, while others have become populist and broader in their appeal. Also, of course, Adelaide Writers' Week remains free, apart from the two evening sessions. Speaking at the program launch, he said, 'the committee would be very courageous to play around with the format,' which has been so successful over the years. Fifty years after its beginnings, the committee is concerned to retain Writers' Week's unique appeal, which has surely helped make it the second longest-running writers' festival in the world, after the UK's Cheltenham Festival of Literature.

If you're wondering why your favourite author isn't on the program, it may be because, whoever they are, writers are only ever invited to one in three festivals. There is a strict procedure: each author must be nominated by three members of the committee. Hosking seemed taken aback when I asked whether non-book writers were ever invited – scriptwriters, journalists or even perhaps visual poets or hypertext novelists. 'No,' he said, 'Writers' Week is about books.'

And from the crowds to be encountered in those two tents on that sliver of flat land beside the Parade Ground every second March, it is evident that books are far from obsolescent despite the explosion of new media. The second Town Hall evening session, featuring Peter Carey, Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt and Ian McEwan, sold out almost as soon it was released for sale. Even your correspondent couldn't get a seat. Luckily these authors are also presenting at least one free session during the week. Evening One, with Scottish crime writer Denise Mina, English novelist Deborah Moggach, Milan-based essayist and novelist Tim Parks and Orange Prizewinner Linda Grant, also looks promising.

One new feature, not strictly part of Writers' Week but nevertheless drawing on the talents of several participants, is the Persian Garden Poets session in the Festival Centre Amphitheatre on Thursday 6 March. Australians Dorothy Porter, Mike Ladd and John Kinsella team with Irish poet Paul Durcan and UK performance poet Luke Wright for a 'celebration of verse'.

Several Australian expats are appearing this year. Dual Booker Prizewinner Peter Carey, launching his new novel *His Illegal Self*, of course, but also Pulitzer winner Geraldine Brooks (*People of the Book* reviewed this issue) and the always controversial Professor Greer. There is a powerful New York contingent accompanying Peter Carey – Paul Auster, novelist and film director, whose film *Smoke* was a cult classic in the mid-nineties, and his wife Siri Hustvedt, poet and novelist, whose atmospheric *Sorrows of an American* is reviewed this issue. Peter Godwin, author of *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (reviewed this issue), also hails from New York, though he writes about Zimbabwe. There is also a slight Scottish flavour, with Denise Mina (author of *Last Breath*, reviewed this issue) and novelist James Meek (Kirsty Gunn, another Scot, was unable to come at the last minute). On

the more exotic side, there is the brilliant young German novelist Daniel Kehlmann, whose novel *Measuring the World* has recently been published in an English translation, Iranian-American Anita Amirrezvani, Spanish novelist Enrique de Heriz, and Ugandan Moses Isegawa.

From the non-fiction spectrum there is also a strong lineup of talent, such as English military historian Richard Holmes, presenter of *Wellington: The Iron Duke*, who has just published *The World at War* (reviewed this issue), and Auden biographer Richard Davenport-Hines. The Australians include some of our best essayists, Inga Clendinnen, David Marr, Robert Manne and Gideon Haigh; biographer Hazel Rowley and travel writer Robyn Davidson.

Crime writing is represented by Thomas H. Cook and Denise Mina from overseas, and Australian favourites Peter Corris, Garry Disher and Marshall Browne. Indigenous writers include Doris Pilkington and Jared Thomas, and otherwise there is a good representation of Australian authors, including big names like William McInnes, David Malouf, Dorothy Porter and Roger McDonald, and some who will become big names, like Carrie Tiffany, whose *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* is a poignant exploration of life on the land in the 1930s, and Anson Cameron, who so beautifully captures laconic teenage heroism in *Lies I Told About a Girl*. While young readers are not a focus, Nick Earls, Melina Marchetta (*Looking for Alibrandi*) and Randa Abdel-Fattah join Jared Thomas on a panel to discuss writing for the next generation.

Every day at lunchtime you can attend launches of books by the likes of Kate Llewellyn, Geraldine Brooks, Peter Carey, Corrie Hosking and Don Watson.

Writers' Week runs from Sunday 2 to Friday 7 March. TAR is making a point of reviewing as many recently-published Writers' Week books as we can over the

coming weeks. All today's reviews cover WW authors. The program is available from most Adelaide bookshops and can be found on the Adelaide Festival website. See you there!